World Chronicle

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GUEST: Giandomenico Picco
Personal Representative of the Secretary-General
to the United Nations Year of Dialogue
Among Civilizations

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UN YEAR OF DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS

Tolerance is an active principle that thrives on recognition of human rights and cultural pluralism. It is a way of life that allows one to adhere to convictions freely while accepting that others will adhere to theirs. It is the recognition that human beings are diverse and have the right to live in peace with their diversity, while not imposing their beliefs on others. It represents active engagement in democracy and peace. It can help to eliminate prejudgmental attitudes and effectively put an end to violence, extreme nationalism, exclusion and fanaticism. The United Nations General Assembly has designated 2001 as The Year of Dialogue of Civilizations. In this episode of **World Chronicle,** Giandomenico Picco, Personal Representative of the UN's Secretary-General to the Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations, discusses the challenges facing countries to promote notions of human rights, tolerance and cultural pluralism.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The United Nations Charter calls on all people "to practice tolerance and live in peace with one another as good neighbours". But recently, ethnic conflicts that had been dormant for years, have re-emerged causing much suffering for millions of people worldwide. The United Nations General Assembly has designated 2001 as The Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. This is an attempt to promote globally notions of human rights, tolerance and cultural pluralism.

Our guest today was appointed Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to The UN Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. He is Giandomenico Picco, a former United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs. Joining me to talk with Mr. Picco are Ian Williams of *The Nation* and Tuyet Nguyen of the *German Press Agency/DPA*.

Mr. Picco, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

Mr. Picco, as we all know, the colonial powers perceived their mission as a civilizing one but that has undergone some revision in subsequent centuries and the 500th anniversary of 1492, the so-called discovery of the new world which had already been discovered, rather bombed when the idea of a big celebration was first advanced. What is the UN's definition of civilizations?

PICCO: Well, I will tell you what the definition that Kofi Annan and myself have adopted for this particular operation so to speak which is supposed to be of some help to the shaping of the United Nations for the next ten years. And the definition is very simple. We could have chosen existing approaches to the definition. We have decided that what matters most for the United Nations is the element of diversity. So what we are going to focus our attention on is the civilizations, if you like to call it, who perceive diversity as a threat on one side and the civilizations, or those who so define themselves, who perceive diversity as an element of enrichment and betterment. I think the element of diversity is going to be the discriminant factor in the approach that the Secretary-General and myself are going to pursue in an operation which I have to say immediately has received no financial support by the General Assembly and indeed, not much other support in terms of practical

help. So what we are talking about here is trying to use the vision that we can have for a society of the future and aim to be very, very focussed instead of getting lost in conversations which may be too vague and therefore not particularly useful.

LITTLEJOHNS: Now this whole project was, as I recall, an idea put forward by Iran -- but of course you can't speak for Iran officially -- but do you have an idea why Iran was so interested in this? After all Iran is a country which is very ardently, shall we say, Muslim and some people might say that it is not the most tolerant country. Would that be a misperception? But why did Iran get so active in this area?

PICCO: I did have the opportunity to speak about this matter with the President of Iran, President Katami, just a few months ago and of course the subject matter was this very idea of the dialogue among civilizations. He, I believe, liked to suggest that a decade which had started under the conceptual clouds of faulty theories, like the clash of civilizations, should come to an end with the vision perhaps, but not faulty, of a dialogue among civilizations. As you rightly said, why suggest this, of course, is a question for him not for me. But I have to say that the Secretary-General and myself have probably found a way to take an idea from the President of Iran and hopefully make it useful and constructive for the entire membership of the United Nations. To be very specific, I believe that the dialogue among civilizations can be a seed to set a new paradigm for international relations.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is Iran putting its money where its mouth is so to speak? In other words, you spoke about the financing of the year are they putting some money into the pot?

PICCO: Not as far as my activities are concerned. I have to be also very clear in this regard. I'm raising some money from some Member States. I have to say that the Member States I have approached are on purpose and not Member States with large populations or with great size. In fact, I have selected what under a different title one can call the small states. Small in size but not necessarily in ideas and vision. And I think that this was a choice I made because I thought this would be a better approach than to ask for money from countries who may have either vested interests or temptations of another nature.

WILLIAMS: My favourite comment on civilizations was, of course, Gandhi. You remember? He arrived in England and was asked what he thought of Western civilization and he reckoned it would a good idea. And that's one of the problems you mentioned before about the clash of civilizations idea -- Samuel B. Huntington. And of course that

looked as though it was trying to set up a Muslim or an Asian threat to replace the gap that some cold warriors had now that communism has disappeared. Is it a sort of a mirror image of this that motivates the Iranians you think? That they wanted to diffuse this attempt to make Islam the communism of the future as far as threats for America go?

PICCO: I'll respond in two comments here. The first, of course, is that the theory of Sam Huntington was faulted the moment it was written on paper because as we all know when the article which then gave origin to a larger book was first issued in this country at the beginning of the '90s, it happened at the very same time when a conflict was going in the specific case between Armenian and Azerbaijan which was disproving the very fact that the two countries were fighting a civilizational war. Suffice it to say that the allies of those two countries were exactly on the opposite side of their professed religious preference. So the theory was faulty since day one and I don't think that it had any reason to be except as you rightly said to invent an enemy since so many found themselves to be often an enemy by that time. But the real point with the approach that Kofi Annan and I have chosen to give is that if we get caught in the big definition of civilization, we may get caught in the same discussion which took place in the Christian churches between the fourth and the sixth and the tenth century about the sex of the angels. It was an interesting conversation but it led nowhere. So this other definition of civilization is of interest to me but it is what is the operative concept in this suggestion. And the operative concept in our view, that is Kofi Annan and myself, is that diversity is the key essence and if we perceive diversity as a threat we become warmongers, and if we see diversity as an element of growth and enrichment we are in fact supporting the philosophy and the vision of the United Nations. But this has to be very clear.

WILLIAMS: Don't you face the difficulty you sometimes see with some sort of ultra liberal, ultra politically correct that they see diversity as such a virtue in itself that if a tribe wants to eat its children or sort of practice polygamy or beat up their wives then this is part of their culture and it should be respected? Are there no limits to diversity that you'll allow in the name of civilization?

PICCO: You rightly refer to the inherent conceptual risk of preaching diversity and, of course, it is an issue and a role which I have gone through both practically and intellectually in my life. The answer is very simple and very clear. Diversity is an ingredient element of the United Nations Charter but the Charter, by definition, is also an element of

common denominator of behaviour among countries. So diversity at all levels until the end of times no. Diversity has a limit. The limit is the common denominator values which is the Charter, which is part of the documents of the United Nations. If any government is trying to use The Dialogue among Civilization as a very nicely conceived attempt to modify or to change the Charter, or to rewrite the Charter, well let me be very clear. They will find me on the opposite side.

NGUYEN: Mr. Picco, there have been clashes between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, in Indonesia and other places, what can the UN do to really bring them together?

PICCO: The clashes justified under ideas of religion, culture, so-called ethnicity or history are indeed clashes which come from a different origin and are coloured up with that kind of presentation. The United Nations has a long way to go to help in this regard but it's only one way to go and that is to address the mind set of people. I was once asked by a so-called expert of foreign affairs why I was focusing on mind set which seemed to be such an esoteric and metaphysical and philosophical concept. And I responded to him that I was very interested to speak to a person who must have been very lucky. I said to him if your life has never depended on the mind set of the person who was in front of you, you will not know that the mind set is a very concrete matter and a very concrete concept and therefore affecting the mind set is the only way to resolve the problems you are referring to. And affecting the mind set of only one person is a very, very concrete project and if you succeed in changing not, I don't say 10,000 but only one or two, we will be much more concrete than many of the documents which have been approved with a mind but not with a heart.

NGUYEN: But how do you explain those clashes that erupted years after, you know, the end of the Cold War? Is there an economic reason for communities that have been living together for years suddenly and now, you know, at the onset of the new millennium to start fighting each other or killing each other?

PICCO: There is no question that the Cold War had *de facto* introduced in the world a degree of discipline. The existential threat to the Cold War had created, rightly or wrongly, in the minds of many -- had *de facto* set the law and order system around the world. When the existential threat in the minds of many disappeared many people felt that they could do things which they could not do before. And then to this you add the tremendous increase and the facility of getting information and passing on your own opinions to others like never before in history thanks to not only television and radio but of course the

electronic mail and electronic communicating systems and all the rest. And what you have there is a temptation to say well perhaps I now feel that I can do and say things I could not do before because at the end of the day I will still be alive. Having said that let's not try to hide or to justify these wars and to attribute the responsibility for this kind of wars, as I said earlier, to history or religion or culture. The responsibility is always individual. It is always on the individuals because history, religion and culture do not kill. Only individuals can do that.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Giandomenico Picco, Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.

Mr. Picco, you're a famous negotiator. You were responsible for obtaining freedom for the hostages in Lebanon and you also played a major role in getting the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan. How do you propose to go about your new job which must surely also involve an element of negotiating because you have to change – you spoke about mind sets – you have to change the mind set of a number of countries who are violating human rights as we well know, doing other things which are opposed to the Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter itself. How are you going to go about it?

PICCO: I have proposed to the Secretary-General and to the General Assembly a three-point approach and these three points are the consequence of two premises. As I said earlier I have no money and number two I felt that we have to be very, very focused not to become ridiculous.

LITTLEJOHNS: Not to become ridiculous?

PICCO: Yes. Exactly. And therefore my points are as follows. First, we need a very clear conceptual underpinning. This will be achieved by putting together a group of wise persons, which is being approved as the report that I wrote the Assembly in fact was approved. A group of wise people who will spend some time in effect writing a book if you like on the very relevance of the concept of diversity for the UN system, and more importantly on whether in fact diversity can be the beginning of a new paradigm of international relations. This book, I hope, will be presented to the Secretary-General of the United Nations by late summer of 2001 and he may wish in his wisdom to present it in turn to the Member States. The second element of this three-way strategy has to do with the question I ask myself and I say how do you teach dialogue. First of all, I'm no teacher. I don't claim to have been able to teach anything in my life but when I ask who can teach best

I draw the answer from many throughout history and the answer is examples. So I suggested that perhaps the United Nations system could identify what I would like to call the unsung heroes of dialogue who exist around the world and to give them a name and a face. In other words, let's put them on television. And I would like to clip them so to speak and put them in small few seconds television images that will be distributed and, hopefully, broadcast by the televisions of the world every week during the year 2001. For not only that example is the only teacher that has been effective over the years but also images as we know are more significant than many words. And the third point, of course to be again very concrete, and this is my hope and my wish and my expectation but it's a very difficult one, is that I would like very much that the Secretary-General of the United Nations, taking advantage of the dialogue atmosphere, would be in a position to launch what I would like to call a very specific reconciliation process in a particular part of the world. In other words, to take a specific area of the world and to show what he means when he speaks of a new paradigm of international relations.

WILLIAMS: I'm still sort of wrestling about the edge about this question of values and not having them. I mean I find it very difficult to accept either the Texas government or the Taliban as civilized in any real way because they both have this fetish about the death penalty. I mean as part of your role of diversity do you tell everyone that just because the Republican candidate for President likes the death penalty we all have to accept it or because the Taliban like hanging people from the....

LITTLEJOHNS: The Democratic candidate is also in favour of.....

WILLIAMS: Of course yes but he's not quite as bloodthirsty in his relish for it.

PICCO: I start my operation on the dialogue by reflecting on my son. My son spent his formative years as a teenager during a decade when what I call the blasphemies of the '90s were perpetrated. Among these blasphemies we have of course ethnic cleansing, killing in the name of God and similar atrocities. I think it is incumbent upon my generation, as the father of a boy who is now 22 and who has been exposed to these blasphemies when he was a very young boy, to say something about what happened as much as those who were the fathers of the children who were alive during World War II did receive some kind of explanation by their fathers. And if you look at the blasphemies of those years the issue of the death penalty, like many others, it is extremely important, but the very origin of that is that this world showed to the people of 12, 13 and 14 during the '90s that we are prepared to

kill simply because somebody in front of us is allegedly different from what we are. And I think this goes much beyond the issue of the death penalty. And I believe that that is the answer I would like to provide to my son and I would like to suggest that we provide this answer, this ethical answer, to many other people of his generation. The time has come, I believe, in the organization called the United Nations to speak about ethical values and I like to speak about ethical values in terms of spiritual values without defining what kind of religions they belong to. And I think that the United Nations' core ethical value is to believe in diversity. I should hasten to add that diversity has another usefulness in this day and age. It just may happen that diversity will become the human face of globalization.

NGYUEN: But Mr. Picco, let's take a concrete example. The dialogue on the universality of human rights, for example, the debate has been going on for years but it has opposed West against East and actually has widened the gap between the two sides. I wonder if there is another kind of dialogue that you would like to propose that can, you know, help the two sides to get closer?

PICCO: I was very lucky to be given the chance by Kofi Annan to engage myself in this issue but let me tell you that I took it on for one specific reason. I'm no theoretician, I'm no academician and I don't claim to be a great intellectual, but when I go around I can say this one thing to anybody who comes and talks to me from different angles of the world and from different cultural approaches that in my activities in my life I had the opportunity to make very simple decisions. The most important decision I had to make was will I sacrifice my life to save the life of somebody I don't even know and the answer was yes. So when people raise with me the issue of the theoretical level I would say to them, and I have said this in the past, I don't have all the theoretical answers. I am prepared to look at these answers together. But I do claim to have a credibility with what I do with my life and until and unless somebody will put forward to me the same amount of credibility on the basis of their life, not of their discussions, then I believe that the conversation will not be so practical and so useful. Yes, there is diversity of course on the question of what is a human right or not. We all know that. We should not hide. We should tell the truth as it is. It's not a question of being diplomatic. But the question which is the most important question I think, the basis of the future role in international affairs, is that we have to take on the sense of individual responsibility and to become credible individuals. And if credibility is there I think the rest will follow.

NGUYEN: But is there a way you can gauge whether let's say between Christians and Muslims, between East and West, there has been some kind of improvement in understanding each other?

PICCO: I think there has been great improvement. I was of the opinion that ten years ago there was much more ignorance in the West about the East than there is now. I am optimistic about this. I think that people learn more than they knew before and this is very useful because the great enemy of what you're saying is in fact ignorance. And I think we know much more today in the West about Islam and Asia than we did ten years ago and we know less than what we will know in ten years. But I think most importantly is that on both sides of this divide that you're referring to I believe there are more and more individuals who are prepared to call a spade a spade. And if we don't call facts with the name which they are supposed to have then we cannot solve any of the problems which follow from that.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Picco, are there a few countries that you could mention that are actually engaged in this sort of dialogue and are having results from it?

PICCO: Well, I think that there are a number of countries who have approached me who have shown their interest in what we are doing and others who have not approached me. Interestingly enough, those who have approached me are the countries who are more diverse within their own borders. Brazil for one which has been very, very interested. Canada. Countries who have been growing on diversity. As I said, the contribution that I can provide, considering the limitation I have, is very limited but I think The Year of the Dialogue Among Civilization should be seen rather as an excuse and a beginning rather than a deadline or the end of a road.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Picco, we have only a few seconds left but reading some of the material in preparation for this programme I noticed that you laid some stress on the need for partiality in negotiating rather than impartiality. Now aren't you likely to run into some problems if you come out with partiality in this situation?

PICCO: Well, I think that in my experience in the past I never found that the concept of impartiality was a very operative one in any negotiation of some weight and some depth. And when I mean depth I mean involving human lives. I think that the concept which is most useful for negotiation is credibility and credibility means that you do what you say and if you do that, even if you disagree with some, they will respect you because you are who you are.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Picco, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.**

Our guest has been Giandomenico Picco, Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. He was interviewed by Ian Williams of *The Nation* and Tuyet Nguyen of the *German Press Agency/DPA.*

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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